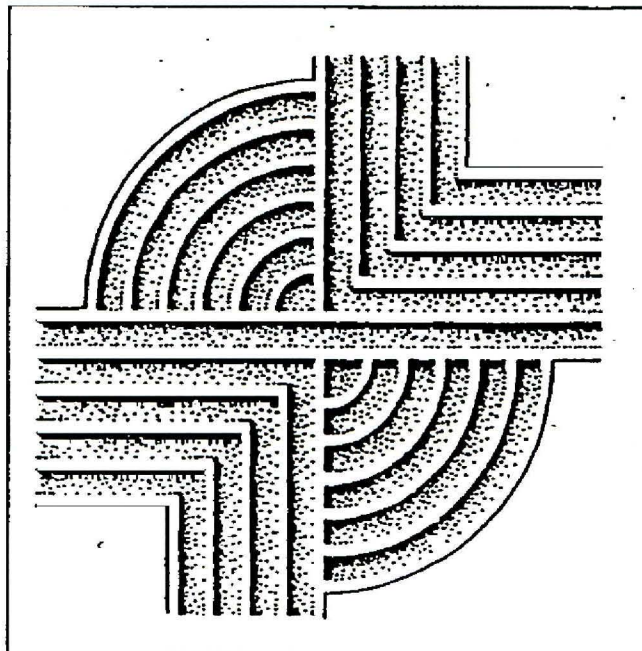


# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LIFE AT THE AMERICAN COMPANY MILL VILLIAGE AND THE VALUE OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS



## RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 104

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**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LIFE AT  
THE AMERICAN SPINNING COMPANY MILL VILLAGE  
AND THE VALUE OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS**

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Chicora Research Contribution 104

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## Introduction

What makes an archaeological project special is the interest that the local community shows in the preservation of their past. During Chicora's work at the American Spinning Company mill village, the citizens of Greenville supported us in a number of ways. We received a lot of assistance with historical research, coordinating volunteers, field work, and interviewing former mill workers. These local volunteers were the key to making the most out of a project that had a very limited budget.

## Background

The mill and village was originally constructed by O.H. Sampson in 1895 who then sold it to the American Spinning Company. Many of the people who came to live in the village were poor landless mountain whites who had few opportunities for improving their condition on the farm. Of course, life working at the mill was not easy either. Many young children worked there, the hours were long, and often the shift work made it so that some family members rarely saw each other. One woman interviewed said that her mother went to work at the mill at age seven.

The mill physically loomed over the village, invading the workers' home in sight and sound. Schools, churches, recreation centers, and health facilities were provided which the management believed would improve the workers' quality of life a great deal. But by providing these facilities, it also helped them to control the workers activities since they could say what could and couldn't be done in these gathering places. Surely, no union meetings went on there. Interestingly, the first place informants mentioned when they spoke to us was the school house. This seems to indicate that education was very important to them. Despite the good and bad of working at the mill village, we found that most people had pleasant memories growing up there -- mainly of their good neighbors and friends.

The mill village was intensively occupied between the 1890s and the 1950s. By the 1970s all of the houses in our project area had been removed. A 1908 photograph shows the style of houses as being primarily New England salt box. They are very similar to many of the houses still standing today in the newer portion of the village.

## Volunteers

When we did this project we had a very limited budget. Despite the large size of the site, the Greenville Redevelopment Authority only had enough money allocated for archaeology to allow one week of field work. The area of the village we were dealing



with included an entire 16 acres with about 72 house lots. With the limited time and money we could only explore two of them. We knew that to get the most from the site with the available funds, we would need some local help with the field work and historical research.

The first people we called upon were Anne McCuen of the Greenville County Historical Commission and Wes Breedlove who is probably more familiar with the archaeology of Greenville County than anyone in the state. Ann did everything from the vital historical study of the village, to collecting information from the people who used to live there, to talking to some of the site visitors. Wes Breedlove coordinated local volunteers, dealt with some of the logistical problems, talked to site visitors, ably assisted with the field work, and spoke to some of the school groups about the work that we were doing. Wes found us a number of volunteers from the Greenville County area including Wendy Gaillard, Jane Kirkman, Amy Madding, Fran Neely, Richard Sawyer, Brian Siegel, Laurie Waldrap, and Clint Welsh.

### The Excavations

Our investigations at the two structures revealed that the site was quite rich and in excellent condition. We uncovered several features including a ditch located in the rear yard of a house lot on Church Street. In this ditch we found a large quantity of refuse which suggests that, like today, ditches often became receptacles for garbage. A second ditch was found in another unit underneath a clay cap. This cap was explained by several former mill workers who said that a clay tennis court was once located there.

At the other structure located on Buff Street, we found a gully or a drip line immediately behind the house. We found a number of artifacts including what we suspect is a weaving loom part. Also we found a Verner Springs Coca Cola bottle which was manufactured in Greenville around 1910. Another interesting artifact type we encountered in our investigations were spindle rings which are iron rings about 1½ inches around which are found at the top of wooden spindles. According to our local informants, mill workers would often bring them home from the mill and burn the wooden spindles for firewood which would leave only the iron rings remaining.

While excavating this house, a Mr. Singleton visited us. We discovered that his grandfather C.S. Porter used to live there. He told us that on the lower side of the house was a flower garden, fish pond, and brick walks. Based on conversations with other informants and photographic information, this ornamental house garden was probably uncommon in the village. Most yards were grassed in front, the backyard usually consisted of swept dirt, and a vegetable garden was often present in the far rear yard of the house.

## Oral History

We were amazed at the public response to our work at the site. While we had many people come out who were just curious, at times we had so many former mill workers on site that it seemed like a convention. Many of them hadn't seen each other in years and spent a lot of time catching up.

During our work, we began to realize that there was a huge untapped source of oral history from these mill workers that needed to be gathered up. Unfortunately, we did not have the time to do proper interviews. However, some eighth grade students from Northwest Middle School in Traveller's Rest visited the site and expressed an interest in doing an oral history project on the mill. Each year several teachers at their school coordinate oral history projects which are published in a book entitled *Echoes*. We are hoping that they will take on this project since it is something that desperately needs done. These people are very willing to share their stories of growing up in the mill village. When one of the local television stations visited, one of the former mill workers stole the lime light.

## Conclusion

Our work at the American Spinning Company Mill was a very rewarding experience. The site turned out to be much richer than we had anticipated. Unfortunately, it deserves further work and it appears that no more will be done. The generosity of the local people in lending whatever assistance they could really made the job easier and allowed us to get more information out of the site than we could have on our own. Wes Breedlove and Anne McCuen were very valuable to the success of this project. We were very fortunate to have such skilled people available to us. We also found that the field volunteers from the Greenville area were not afraid of work; some of them even staying around on the last day of the project to finish up when it was a cold, sleeting December day. Clearly, the public is interested in their past and are willing to be active participants in its preservation.